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SUBJECT: KHMER KROM MONK TIM SAKHORN RESURFACES IN VIETNAM COURTS

REF: A) HCMC 733; B) HCMC 520; C) PHNOM PENH 0905

¶1. (SBU) On August 2, Vietnamese newspaper Thanh Nien reported that Tim Sakhorn, the Khmer Krom monk believed to have been defrocked and deported by Cambodian officials (Refs A and B), is now being held in the southern Vietnam province of An Giang for "sabotaging the solidarity policy." In the report, police claim that Sakhorn had entered Vietnam illegally and confessed to inciting riots and demonstrations against the GVN. He was accused of illegally immigrating to Cambodia and working with Khmer Kampuchea Krom to organize riots and demonstrations against the GVN as well as conspiring to incite riots by falsely accusing the GVN and Royal Cambodian Government (RCG) of repressing Khmers. Poloff contacted An Giang officials to inquire about Sakhorn's legal status, but they declined to provide any further information. Sakhorn's reappearance came after a month during which ConGen and Embassy Phnom Penh had been attempting to ascertain his whereabouts.

¶2. (SBU) On August 1, Poloff paid a courtesy call on Monk Chau Ty, a senior Khmer Krom monk in An Giang and a representative of the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sanga (VBS), and inquired about Sakhorn. Chau Ty claimed he had only become aware of Sakhorn's situation in early July, via Cambodian radio reports which stated that Sakhorn had been defrocked for violating Buddhist law by having women in his room. When asked if he knew Sakhorn's current whereabouts, Chau Ty replied that the radio reports had declared him "lost" and that no one knew his location. In contrast to reports from other Khmer Krom monks in An Giang, Chau Ty denied ever having received instructions from the police to refuse aid to Sakhorn should he arrive at their doors (Ref A).

¶3. (SBU) On July 3, Monk Chau Pina of An Giang Province had provided information to ConGen regarding Sakhorn's background and prior travel to Vietnam. Since that time, however, he has become uncomfortable sharing information with the USG after receiving warnings from his family regarding potential harassment from local officials. (Comment: Chau Pina's newfound reticence may also stem from a negative response we received from the provincial External Relations Office (ERO) after Poloff asked ERO to arrange a meeting with him; ERO instead suggested a visit with Monk Chau Ty. Chau Ty's impartiality is questionable, since he is known to have a close relationship with the GVN and admitted to being present during a meeting that resulted in the defrocking of five Khmer Krom monks convicted of organizing political protests in Soc Trang province in May (Ref B). End comment.)

¶4. (SBU) While the media reported that Sakhorn had been "prosecuted", he has in fact been detained by authorities while they investigate the charges brought against him. Given that Sakhorn has yet to be officially indicted, it could take over a year for him to come to trial. In addition, the accusations of illegal entry into Vietnam do little to clarify the issue of Sakhorn's Vietnamese/Cambodian nationality. Post understands that Khmer Kampuchea Krom are considered Cambodian citizens while in Cambodia; for this reason, some observers recognize the possibility of dual citizenship (Ref C).

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Given that Sakhorn is perceived to be a dissident, the allegations that he was forcibly removed from Cambodia into Vietnam, with possible coordination between RCG and GVN authorities, are troubling. ConGen will continue to monitor the situation as new developments occur. End Comment.

¶6. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi and Embassy Phnom Penh.

FAIRFAX